

The responsibilities of the media

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The responsibilities of the media in reporting environmental issues are not too much different from reporting other kinds of issues. The same requirements of accuracy, clarity and those problematic concepts of balance and objectivity apply. But because environmental issues are often an amalgam of science, economics, politics and values, reporting the environment is in some ways more difficult than other areas.

I might say that it is not for me to tell other journalists what their responsibilities might be. I am pretty fresh to reporting on the environment, but I did have the advantage of working with the best — albeit briefly. I am talking about the late great Dr Peter Hunt — unquestionably Australia's best environment reporter. He really was a pioneer in this relatively new field. His journalism was distinguished by vigour, clarity, detailed research and an ingredient too often missing in this field — *humour*.

These are the qualities we want to bring to "Green and Practical" — our attempt at a new kind of environment programme. What I am saying today springs from the many discussions we have had about the new programme and our weekly experience of making the show with a small team and limited budget.

A crucial issue is — *Who sets the environmental agenda*. I think it is fair to say that environment groups make most of the running here. They issue the faxes, make the phone calls and if it is exciting enough, the media follows. In making a two-hour programme with few resources I can understand the temptation of letting these groups do the ground work — especially for the electronic media which relies on a televisual "event" to hang the story around. Journalists need to take the initiative themselves and create their own stories rather than waiting to be fed by green groups. As we have found, there are a million and one good environmental stories out there — one just has to get on the phone and find them.

This brings me to *sources*. The environment movement has become increasingly specialized in the past couple of years. There are now people who have developed a body of expertise

in particular areas. I think this increasing sophistication is a good thing, but it is important for journalists to go beyond those vested interests and obvious sources to talk to people with a first-hand knowledge. This always takes more time and the message might end up being the same, but the impact is stronger and credibility of the story is enhanced.

The person you are looking for might be a scientist — it might be a sawmiller, a farmer or someone who is experienced first-hand, whatever the situation is.

Peter Hunt was especially diligent about this — some of you will remember his forestry programmes where he spoke with timber workers and sawmillers about waste and other malpractice in the timber industry — these interviews were so much more convincing than getting information second hand from a conservationist — however well meaning or informed they might be.

Another challenge for journalists is to penetrate the *Greenspeak* which is so all pervasive now — as John Hewson said recently, "We're all green now." Sometimes the propaganda emanating from industry and business bodies is barely distinguishable from that of the conservationists. This is especially true in the area of green marketing. I speak to dozens of people each week who say that what they are doing is "good for the environment" rather like some kind of green tonic.

This gets me on to the topic of complexity — and Harry Recher's comments about simple journalists reporting complex issues. As I have said, so much of this area is complex — it is about science, economics, politics and values all at once. Let us take science. Journalists often get frustrated by the inability of scientists to talk in absolute terms, to make bold statements and to predict outcomes.

Science is all about theories that change, about doubt and asking questions — not necessarily answering them. To a journalist who wants to know if A will cause B this can be very frustrating, so often the answer is "It depends."

But overall, I think looking at the scientific dimension of an environmental issue is a lot more interesting and meaningful than getting bogged down with the day-to-day politics. Some issues are too complex (and to be honest too dry) to make good radio — there are a few issues I admit to putting in the too hard basket. When I work out ways of doing them interestingly, I will.

Since science is the starting point for a lot of environmental issues, a bit of scientific literacy goes a long way. Many times this year I have felt the need for a quick Ph.D. in chemistry, forestry, not to mention marine biology and entomology. Of course, it is impossible to be fully informed across every discipline, but having a unit within the ABC which specializes in science programmes and employs scientists is very important.

Like finance journalism, the language of the environment is becoming increasingly inaccessible and jargonistic. A survey by ARM Quantum (a Melbourne-based market research company) on attitudes to the environment found that only about 12 per cent of people had any idea what “sustainability” meant. It is a word that is now used all the time and it is supposed to form the basis of future economic development. We talk about some aspect of sustainability in our programme every week but we have found that even among the environmental in-crowd there is a lot of disagreement about what it actually means. Other misunderstood terms include biological

diversity, intractable waste, the precautionary principle, old growth forests, to name but a few. We assume that people know what we are talking about but I am not sure that is always the case. And can we please find a substitute for “environmentally friendly”!

Conflict is what a lot of reporting is all about — it is the tension in a particular issue that makes it interesting. On a simple level this is about putting a “baddie” up against a “goodie”. What we are trying to do is replace the simplistic goodies and baddies type conflict with something a bit more constructive. To challenge the idea that environmental protection always costs jobs. To look at the merits of a particular issue without trying to find polarized points of view. By doing the research and drawing our own conclusions.

There is no substitute for *rigour and critical journalism* in this field, as in any other. I think there is a mistaken view within the media that, because at a superficial level the environment is about trees, cuddly and furry animals and quality of life issues, it is a bit soft. Maybe even a bit *wet and worthy*. I think this is unfair — in the public's eye it is among the top three issues of concern. Of course, unemployment is number one in people's minds — that is understandable, we are in a recession. But the environment is well and truly on the *mainstream agenda*, and from my point of view it is one of the most exciting areas to be in at the moment. That is, when I am not getting too depressed by the enormity of the problems which face us.